

Local Governance through Organic Farming

The bio-district of the Vara Valley, a private/public partnership to assure vitality to a rural area.

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Author's Background

Agronomist and part-time farmer. He works for AIAB, the Italian Association for Organic Farming since 14 years, he covered the role of President and lately of director of AIAB Liguria. He deals with policy and technical issues. He has been for 10 years the Italian board member of the IFOAM EU group. President of the Biodistretto Val di Vara.

Summary

Organic farming became an issue in the Vara Valley, Liguria, NW Italy, during the end of the 90s. The conversion of local cattle farmers to organic, fostered development, identity, co-operation, labour and finally gave a well deserved nickname of the Organic valley (la Valle del Biologico) that attracted tourism to the area. The Bio-district Val di Vara is formally and legally recognised by the Regional Council of Liguria, by the regional law 66/2009. The law itself sets the criteria to reach the recognition as Bio-distretto.

The share of organic farms over the total farms of the bio-district area is 22 %, and it is considerably larger both of the regional share (1,9 %) and the national one (2,8 %). The share of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of organic farms is 50 % of total farmland of the bio-district. One hectare out of two is certified organic.

To foster rural vitality is the clear objective of the biodistrict, but also to expand its international network of relations, seeking fruitful partnerships in order to exchange experiences, and learn from good practices.

Background

The Biodistrict was pushed in 1998 by a local Major, with the support of the Regional Council, through the Rural Development Plan. In a typical marginal and depressed area, as the Vara Valley was, Organic represented a U turn. The conversion of local cattle farmers to organic fostered development, identity, co-operation, labour and finally gave a well deserved nickname of the Organic valley (la Valle del Biologico) that attracted tourism to the area.

The results are clear 15 years later. The agricultural census results tells that in Italy, following the re-structuring of farms, increase of bureaucracy and the current crisis, between 2000 and 2010, 37% of breeding farms has ceased, in the Regione of Liguria 57% closed their business, in the Vara Valley only 10%. Moreover in the last 15 years the local cooperatives producing cheese and meat have doubled their turnover.

Main chapter

Introduction

A bio-district is a geographical area where farmers, citizens, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of local resources, based on organic production and consumption (short food chain, purchasing groups, organic canteens in public offices and schools). In bio-districts, the promotion of organic produce is inextricably linked with the promotion of the land and its special characteristics so that it can fully realise its economic, social and cultural potential.

AIAB, the Italian Association for Organic Farming, promoted since few years the "conversion" of territories to organic farming, through the creation of Biodistricts. In Italy at the moment there are 6 legally recognised biodistretti.

Bio-districts are functional to address different challenges in six main areas:

- *Mix Farming*, agriculture that mixes crop production with animal husbandry and complies with the new frontiers of sustainability (energy, water, biodiversity, quality of life and work). This challenge cannot always be met by farms alone, especially when they are small and fragmented, in this way a partnership approach, such as bio-districts, can provide positive results.
- *Land access*, is difficult for those who do not have substantial economic resources and in particular for young people who wish to become farmers. Bio-districts can promote a genuine "agricultural renaissance", marking a break with the past and using the organic model as a reference point for agriculture as a whole, such as to give a new lease of life to state-owned land and uncultivated land, making agricultural work once again a respectable and profitable occupation.
- *Fairer relations* in the supply chain, establishing direct relations between producers and consumers, adopting alternative distribution channels such as the short supply chain and fair trade, and urging public authorities to buy more local produce for canteens in schools, hospitals and other public facilities.
- *Food sovereignty*, granting local communities the right to decide for themselves what to produce and how to produce it. It allows to have a diversified agro-ecosystem, with plenty of different productions.
- *Simplified organic certification system*, making it less bureaucratic, more effective and inclusive, making use of "group certification" and eventually of "participatory guarantee systems". Since there is a high concentration of organic farms in bio-districts, simplified control procedures are easier to implement.

- *Organic communication*, bio-districts ease communication and raise external interest upon the area. Organic farming is perceived good for producers and consumers alike, for society and the environment.

The process of recognition and the partnership

The Bio-district Val di Vara – Valle del Biologico - is formally and legally recognised by the Regional Council of Liguria, precisely by the regional law 66/2009. The law itself sets the criteria to reach the recognition as Bio-distretto. These criteria includes the vocation of the environment and the farming area, and the significance of the organic farmers and land cultivated, compared to the total, has to be of 6 point of percentage above the regional and national averages. At least 13% of regional organic operators has to based within the area of the Biodistretto.

Table 1: Distribution of total farmers and organic farmers and Utilised Agricultural Area, in Italy, Region of Liguria and in the Biodistrict of the Vara Valley.

Distribution	Total farms ISTAT 2010 Agriculture census			Organic Farms ISTAT 2010 Agriculture census		
	Number of Farms	Total Surface (Ha)	UAA (Ha)	Number of Farms	Total Surface (Ha)	UAA (Ha)
Italy	1.620.884	17.081.099	12.856.048	45.167	1.603.214	1.251.731
Liguria	20.208	9.8048	43.784	382	6.273	3.911
Biodistretto Val di Vara	442	9.353	4810	97	3821	2386

The share of organic farms over the total farms of the bio-district area is 22 %, and it is considerably larger both of the regional share (1,9 %) and the national one (2,8 %). The share of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of organic farms is 50 % of total farmland of the bio-district. One hectare out of two is certified organic. The level is again remarkably higher of the regional share (8,9 %) and the national one (9,7%).

The law establishes also the type of organisation the district needs to have: a consortium or an association mixed public and private, with the latter having 51 % of the seats in the executive board.

The Vara Valley opted to rule the Biodistretto in form of a non-profit Association, with an executive board of 5 persons, where the municipalities have two representatives and the farmers three.

The process for the set up of the biodistretto has been long and has deep roots. The movement in the area started at the end of the 90s, grew up during the last century, it was legally recognised as Bio-district in 2013, and on march 2014 was founded the Association. The intention of AIAB was to facilitate the involvement of all the 7 municipalities of the area of the Alta Val di Vara: Varese Ligure, Sesta Godano, Maissana, Zignago, Carro, Carrodano, Rocchetta Vara, all the farmer's associations insisting and competing in the area (4), the 2 local cooperatives producing meat and cheese. The most difficult task was to get all the farmers' representatives around the table and to work together.

After the set up of the association started a membership campaign towards single farms and operators to join the district. Also restaurants, hotels, B&B, agriturismo, food shops can be member of the organisation, assuring that they sell or use in the kitchen, local organic products.

Objectives and actions of the Bio-district

The specific objectives agreed by the members of the Bio-district are

- To foster organic production in the valley, also diversifying the types of production, now focused mainly in meat and milk, increasing fruticulture, horticulture and local processing.
- To promote local consumption of locally produced organic outcomes, between the civil society but mostly in the HoReCa system.
- To increase the cohesion, the participation of all the stakeholders involved in the organic food chain, together with the local institutions, in order to promote the organic way inside and outside the bio-district.
- To support production, packaging, marketing, and promotion of organic production.
- To promote and preserve agro-biodiversity, cultural traditions and the natural environment.
- To ease access and simplify the procedures for organic certification, based on EU Regulations.
- To promote and organise research, demonstration, extension, and education activities concerning organic agriculture and sustainable governance of the area.
- To foster tourism in the valley linked to the high natural value of the area, the organic production and the cultural traditions.

First steps

After the institution of the Biodistrict, two months ago, the main task of the board is to develop a 5 years management plan. Several meetings are being held in the 7 municipalities in order to get feedback from producers, cooperatives, other commercial activities and authorities upon main priorities and actions to be addressed with the work of the organisation.

Between priorities raised in the first meetings, the following have been the most debated: adequate support for organic farming from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), effective control of wild fauna threatening farming (wild boars, roe deer, and lately wolves), effective promotion of the valley, develop short supply chain, simplification of the farmer administration burden.

A selection of local farms participated, in late march in Milan, at "Fa la Cosa Giusta", the most important fair of conscious consumption and sustainable lifestyles in Italy.

For the near future a two days festival will be organised the first week end of September 2014: the Biological. The event will be the annual appointment where the biodistrict show itself to the outside world, with a Farmer's market, organic street food, handicrafts, workshops, seminars, street art and a music concert in the green fields of Varese Ligure. The last event organised by the association of the youngster of the valley.

The day before the Biological, the Biodistrict will organise a national conference in Varese Ligure (the main village of the bio-district) titled: "Biodistricts a model of governance for rural areas" representatives from the other organic district will be participating (in Italy there are 6 biodistricts, legally recognised).

A clear objective of the biodistrict is also to expand its international network of relations, seeking fruitful partnerships in order to exchange experiences, and learn from good practices. In order to achieve this The Valle del Biologico has joined AIAB network of bio-districts.



Figure 1. Panorama of the lower part of the Vara Valley

Core messages and conclusions

The Biodistrict of Val di Vara, Valle del Biologico, is a new sprout but has old roots. Organic farming for this valley since late 90s has been the life line after decades of oblivion and underdevelopment, due to ageing of the population, urbanisation and land abandonment. The organic choice has been able to turn a marginal area with no resources apart from farmland and woods to a valley with an identity, recognised inside and outside, able to drive the social and economic development of the area.

The foundation of the Bio-district came after many years of development of organic production in the area, is this a delay or the right timing? It was the due time for two reasons: the lack of local institutions and the entry into force of the regional law setting the criteria for organic districts. For decades the local development was managed by a local authority named Comunità Montana (Mountain Community), as everywhere in mountain regions in Italy, covering many issues of social and economic development from agriculture, to waste recycling, from infrastructures to social assistance. The wind of the crisis closed down this useful local authorities, and after few years also the Province had to be downsized. The Bio-district is aimed actually to cover this lack of local governance, and to promote a different model of development, carried out by a public/private partnership, with organic farming as a means for rural vitality.